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Refugee Students in Public Schools: Guidelines for Developing Inclusive School Counseling Programs

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This paper identifies key experiences of refugee students and reviews how these children integrate into the formal schooling system in America. Refugee children face specific challenges, and counseling services are critical for the students' success. Guidelines on counseling refugee students are limited. The purpose of this article is to provide guiding suggestions for school counselors to effectively help refugee students by identifying roles, responsibilities, and functions of school counselors using the ASCA National Model.

Keywords: refugee students, ASCA, public schools, counselors, displacement, refugee needs

The Geneva Convention of 1951 defines a refugee as someone who fears being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, or membership of a particular social group or political opinion and who is unable or is unwilling to return to the country of nationality (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 1993). The United States accepts the highest number of refugees in the world (UNHCR, 2008). The native countries of refugees vary significantly from year to year and are a reflection of events that occur across the globe. Refugee youth are among the most vulnerable refugee subpopulation.

Refugee children that have resettled across the United States have become part of the educational system. There are multiple variables that affect the process of their successful adaptation and participation in the American school system. In this paper, we generalize refugee experiences, but the reader should keep in mind that these experiences vary. In addition, although we describe common challenges that refugee students face in schools, focusing only on these potential problems might lead to stigmatization and might be misleading and unfair (Hyman, Beiser, & Vu, 1996; Weine et al., 2004). It is important to consider that trauma and mental problems are not inherent in the migration and refugee experiences (Hyman, Beiser, & Vu, 1996). Many refugee youth successfully adapt to the host culture and school system in spite of the challenges and traumatic experiences (Hyman, Beiser, & Vu, 1996).

The basic premise of education is to serve all children regardless of who they are, where they come from, and what they bring or do not bring with them (Skrla & Scheurich,

2003). Within the American education system, school counseling programs are founded on the principles of assisting all children to succeed. We seek to define the professional school counselors' role in helping refugee students to reach their full potential.

Understanding Psychological Needs of Refugee Students

Process of Displacement

Refugees are forced to leave their homes and create a new life in another country. Displacement involves the need to acquire a different language and to face issues of cultural conflict and minority status (Anderson, Hamilton, Moore, Loewen, & Frater-Mathieson, 2004). When refugees arrive to a new country, they might experience a shift in identity in terms of their perception of themselves, especially if they had a privileged status in their country of origin (Farver, Narang, & Bhadha, 2002). Besides the initial culture shock and ongoing cultural adaptation, the new predetermined social system might force refugees into a different position in the societal hierarchy. They start to recognize themselves as radical beings in the context of American society. The sud-

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den experience of becoming the “other,” or the underrepresented group, adds extra difficulties to the adaptation to a new culture and environment (Farver, Narang, & Bhadha, 2002). Becoming an ethnic and socio-economic minority may create ambiguous feelings, and the stress of such an identity shift might hinder the cultural adaptation.

The process of migration and feelings of displacement can be explained by “the psychology of place” (Fullilove, 1996, p. 6). Loss of attachment to a familiar physical place adds additional stress on individuals (Anderson, Hamilton, Moore, Loewen, & Frater-Mathieson, 2004). Humans are spatial beings, places are tied to our individual lives, and the place influences our personification and social relationships (Bachelard, 1994; Simms, 2008). As Simms (2008) notes, “the place we call home is inscribed into our bodies; the street we call ours is the setting for our communal longing and belonging” (p. 87). Therefore when refugees are relocated, they lose touch not only with their homes but also their personal, spiritual, and emotional connections. Such disconnect has an ultimate effect on their coping, acculturation, adaptation, and survival (Anderson, Hamilton, Moore, Loewen, & Frater-Mathieson, 2004).

Process of Relocation: Loss and Grief

When working with refugee students it is important to consider pre-, trans-, and post-migration issues (Anderson, Hamilton, Moore, Loewen, & Frater-Mathieson, 2004). The transition of refugees occurs in three phases. The first, escaping their home country, oftentimes happens quite suddenly. The second phase is characterized by a process of transition to a new country, at which they often find themselves in refugee camps, possibly for prolonged periods of time and with extreme deprivation. Lastly, refugees arrive to a host country that is geographically, linguistically, and culturally different and in which they have limited resources. Because of the possible trauma of the entire resettlement experience, it is important for counselors to not only focus on pre-migration experiences, but also on trans-migration and final settlement conditions.

Pre-migration issues are often traumatic and have tremendous impact on refugee students’ mental health (Hyman, Beiser, & Vu, 1996). Pre-migration trauma is identified as a factor that leads mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, anger, and psychosomatic symptoms (Hyman, Beiser, & Vu, 1996; Villalba, 2009; Zivcic, 1993). Transmigration experiences can play a part in increasing or decreasing the refugee students’ vulnerability (Frater-Mathieson, 2004). If they spent time in refugee camps, the length and conditions of their stay are important factors. The transition process by itself can be a traumatic experience. It is characterized by mixed feelings of relief of survival, sadness of displacement, and fear of the unknown future. Post-migration conditions, availability of resources, and support systems determine the experiences of settlement to a new country as negative or positive.

The nature of a refugee’s initial encounter with the host society determines the extent to which they adapt to the new

culture (Anderson, 2004). For example, in the United States, refugees are eligible for federal financial aid for approximately six months after their arrival (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). Other financial assistance, such as help with rent, basic food, and transportation might be available in different states. Refugees often experience poverty (Anderson, Hamilton, Moore, Loewen, & Frater-Mathieson, 2004; Brown, 2011). In addition to poverty, their experiences of stigmatization, discrimination, and prejudice may add to the acculturation stress (Hyman, Beiser, & Vu, 1996; Villalba, 2009).

Acculturation

Acculturation is the process by which a non-dominant group engages in various levels of cultural exchange and participation with the dominant group (Berry, 2001). Acculturation occurs in four phases. Separation occurs when an individual refuses to participate in the target culture and prefers to remain immersed only in the culture of origin. Immigrants and refugees become marginalized when they do not maintain their own cultural heritage and also reject participation with the dominant group. Assimilation is defined by a lack of maintenance of the original culture while keeping a high level of contact with the target culture, and integration, the healthiest type of acculturation, occurs when immigrants are able to keep their own culture while interacting with the dominant group (Mana, Orr, & Mana, 2009). While these acculturation levels are typically applied to adults, similar acculturation models have been established for adolescents and children. Like adults, integration is the most successful phase for them (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006). The nature and length of the acculturation process might be different for parents and their children.

These different levels of cultural acquisition, labeled as dissonant acculturation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), create an acculturation gap (Piedra & Engstrom, 2009) for refugees. An acculturation gap may result in communication barriers, cultural incongruence, and family conflict that consequently increase levels of stress and identity conflict for adolescents (Hwang, 2006). The faster adaptation of children results in the additional challenge of being asked to help with translation and system navigation by adults. This type of role reversal creates additional conflict between parents and children (Hyman, Beiser, & Vu, 1996) as the fear of loss of authority experienced by parents can add to the acculturative stress (Villalba, 2009).

Understanding Educational Needs of Refugee Students

Considering the factors related to resettlement and acculturation, a school’s role in providing necessary, sufficient resources and experiences to accommodate and meet the needs of refugee children is critical as schools are the first and most extensive contact for refugees (Anderson, 2004). Schools, however, demonstrate rather limited ability to pro-

vide faculty, staff, and administrators with knowledge, training, and resources appropriate and necessary to address the needs of refugee students (Szente & Hoot, 2006). Differences in previous schooling, level of change of lifestyle, availability of family support, change in home situation, and possible past traumatic experiences represent just a sample of the larger set of issues that affect the academic performance of refugee children (Rutter, 2003). Most often, the school does not immediately consider these, and students are accommodated based solely on their need to develop the English language. There are significant differences with respect to students' language experiences. Some refugee students have had various degrees of previous second language learning experiences as they have resided in refugee camps and settlements in different countries while formal instruction in their native language may have been quite limited.

The need for looking further than students' experiences with language is determined by the previous educational experiences of refugee students. They vary greatly, similarly to and in reflection of their life changing resettling transitions. Some students may lack formal schooling, or at least over a prolonged time, while others might have experienced regular school attendance, possibly followed by shorter or longer interruptions due to relocation. These significant variations further contribute to the complexity of the process of adaptation (Anderson, 2004). Lack of knowledge about previous school systems, curriculum, and language experiences would seriously limit the ability to provide adequate services to refugee students.

School counselors play a key role in establishing these background factors. In addition to being aware and reflective of students' past life experiences, they must collect information regarding countries in which refugee students have attended school, beliefs about the role of formal schooling in one's life, the relevance of education to social status, methods of student discipline, relationships between students and teachers, and the role of parents in education (Kirova, 2006; Hamilton, 2004). Additional factors such as understanding traditional and previous experiences with adults in positions of authority can also influence students' attitudes toward schooling and affect the level of participation and their willingness to integrate in a formal school environment. School counselors could become the key link between refugee students and teachers working to establish productive academic relationships.

School Counselor Roles: ASCA Model

In light of the individual and educational considerations described above, it is important that counselors re-evaluate their roles and responsibilities to effectively serve refugee students. The American School Counseling Association (ASCA) developed a national model as a guiding framework to develop comprehensive, developmental, and systematic school counseling programs (ASCA, 2005) which can inform the development of practices that address the unique needs of refugee children. In the next section we offer a

guide to school counselors to effectively serve refugee students in terms of enhancing their academic, career, and personal/social development. An abbreviated version of the recommendations based on the ASCA model is presented in Table 1. The amount of time the school counselors spend on different components and activities vary by grade level. Thus, we present only general suggestions applicable in both elementary and secondary levels. A detailed guide for secondary school counselors was developed by the Minnesota Department of Education (2010) and can be used as a reference.

Foundation

ASCA national model defines "Foundation" as an examination of the core beliefs that the program is built upon (ASCA, 2005). In order to work effectively with refugee students, the program mission should be culturally relevant and inclusive and should reflect the cultural demographics of the school (Arredondo & Arciniega, 2001; Villalba, Akos, Keeter, & Ames, 2007). School counselors should develop cultural competencies that include developing awareness on how their personal beliefs on immigration and refugee legislation and political discussions may affect and potentially impair their program development and delivery. It is also helpful for school counselors to be knowledgeable of historical and current sociopolitical influences that may impact refugee students. In order to build school counseling programs on a strong foundation, school counselors must identify the sources of potential challenges for refugee students. This includes advocating and challenging school structures and practices (Hamilton & Moore, 2004). Building a strong foundation is important, as school experiences should not echo these students' past traumatic experiences. The school counseling program should promote experience of justice and fairness (Blackwell & Melzak, 2000).

Delivery System

A school counseling program delivery system grants the delivery of services through three program elements: the guidance curriculum, individual student planning, and responsive services (ASCA, 2005; Cobia & Henderson, 2007).

Guidance curriculum. Guidance curriculum should have activities to educate host country students about cultural diversity. Therefore the curriculum should help the elimination of stereotypes and prejudices about refugees (Clemente & Collison, 2000; Hyman, Beiser, & Vu, 1996) through classroom instruction, small group discussion, guidance activities, and parent or local presenters. Guidance curriculum should also promote the integration of refugee students in the school system by respecting and supporting their cultural values and practices. Including refugee students' culture, history, and language in the program serves to facilitate resilience as it promotes ethnic pride as one having positive ethnic identity (Hyman, Beiser, & Vu, 1996). Such curriculum will also enhance a sense of familiarity and belong-

Table 1. Suggestions to School Counselors Based on ASCA National Model

ASCA National Model Components		Suggestions
Foundation		Inclusive and reflective program mission School counselors should develop awareness and knowledge Identify sources of challenge School counseling program should promote justice and fairness
Delivery System	Guidance Curriculum	Educate host country students to prevent stereotypes and prejudice Promote integration of refugee students Promote ethnic pride for resiliency Enhance sense of familiarity and belongingness Prevent bullying
	Individual Student Planning	Advocate and be system change agent by challenging systemic barriers Use authentic and alternative assessment Encourage extracurricular activities Teach refugee students about the general educational system in USA and in the state
	Responsive Services	Rebuild constancy Be inclusive in the definition of family Conduct English classes for families Develop knowledge on signs of stress, anxiety and trauma Focus on pre, trans and post migration issues Educate about counseling services, pay attention to cultural differences in help seeking Conduct comprehensive assessment Be creative build rapport Reach out to families for their mental health needs Incorporate cultural adaptation into group counseling Use variety of counseling methods
	Systems Support	Collaborate with teachers and administrators Provide ongoing training and professional development Seek consultation from community
Management System		Advisory council should have members representing refugee groups Help teachers to incorporate culture in their courses Work closely with ELL teachers Provide support to teachers to deal with vicarious trauma Build bridges with the community
Accountability		Use alternative methods to evaluate the program Use desegregated data Demonstrate the effectiveness of services and further needs

ness and will create a new safe "psychology of place". Blackwell and Melzak (2000) stated that refugee students are one of the groups that are bullied in schools. It is important for school counselors to educate the host students on respecting differences and reaching out to refugee students. The school system could be intimidating to refugee students, but since they would rarely seek help on their own, school counselors could lead the supporting effort to help them feel welcome and understand educational traditions.

Individual student planning. School counselors need to ensure that all students, including refugee students, have active and constantly evolving academic and career plans (ASCA, 2005). Schools often fail to consider that refugee students' academic performance is limited by their lack of knowledge and experience on how to navigate the American school system. For example, students who have studied in a country with a predetermined national curriculum might not understand the importance of course sequencing, graduation

planning, and the role of students and parents in the process. In this case, school counselors have important roles in helping students and families learn the educational system.

Individual student planning should further include authentic or alternative assessments for refugee students in order to assess knowledge in content areas to guide most appropriate placement in academic classes (Fong, 2007a). School counselors should consider that refugee students may need more language support in advanced classes. They should also encourage and support refugee students to participate in extracurricular activities. These activities have an important role in successful acculturation (Villalba, Akos, Keeter, & Ames, 2007) and have the potential to provide an experience of accomplishment.

Responsive services. Individual or group counseling, consultation with other professionals and refugees in the community, peer facilitation, and peer mentorship are examples of interventions that school counselors can establish. Constancy has been missing in refugee students' lives. Seeing and talking to the same people might help to rebuild constancy.

When working with families, school counselors must be inclusive in their definition of "family." If culturally appropriate, include grandparents, uncles, and family friends and understand that their families are spread around the world when assessing, conceptualizing presenting issues, and identifying psychological support (Weine, et al., 2004). School counselors can act as a liaison to help the refugee families become aware of community organizations that can offer support and assistance. School counselors can advocate for (a) designating a bicultural/bilingual liaison between school and parents, (b) organizing home visit by school personnel, (c) hiring interpreters for parent-teacher conferences, (d) organizing special after school events that involve parents, and (e) providing orientations to refugee families (Birman, Weinstein, Chan, & Beehler, 2007).

Individual counseling. Refugee students often have experienced life-changing events that are unthinkable to the majority of their teachers and peers (Anderson, 2004). The influence of these events on students' readiness and willingness to participate in a structured academic life should be considered. Because of the intense trauma that refugee students might have experienced, they are often found to be withdrawn, aggressive, unable to concentrate, anxious, or hyperactive (Coelho, 1998). Providing individual counseling to refugee students is vital as quite often their mental health needs remain unmet (Brown, Miller, & Mitchell, 2006). However, school counselors must be careful about bringing up the past trauma (Weine, et al., 2004) and should not expect refugee students to talk about their trauma. When refugee students decline to talk about their past, it is not a sign of avoidance or resistance; it may very well be how they cope with the trauma. Catharsis as a way of healing may not be supported by their culture. Students might hesitate sharing sensitive information related to their well being

as this might be considered shameful, inappropriate, and a sign of weakness.

When working with refugee students, school counselors should not only pay attention to pre-migration issues but also trans- and post-migration conditions. School counselors must be knowledgeable about trauma issues in order to make appropriate referrals. For many refugee students and their parents, counseling services are unfamiliar (Anderson, 2004). It is important for school counselors to reach out and introduce themselves as well as inform and educate about their role and provided services (Padilla, 1996; Villalba, Akos, Keeter, & Ames, 2007). Developing brochures in native languages, consulting the individuals in the larger community to learn about the cultural attitudes towards counseling, and having resources in native languages are important. Quite often, individuals in the community are willing to complete the translations and volunteer their services. Therefore, it is not a matter of financial resources but school counselors leaving their comfort zones and partnering with the larger community. In the assessment process, school counselors must be cognizant of the factors such as student's degree of acculturation, country of origin, amount of time he or she has lived in the area, English proficiency, socioeconomic status, and reports of discrimination (Clemente & Collison, 2000; Fong, 2007a). Assessment and interventions should be strength based, empowering, grounded in cultural values, and inclusive of indigenous methods of healing.

Establishing a strong counseling relationship can be more challenging as some of these students have learned not to trust others (Blackwell & Melzak, 2000). One way to establish rapport can be learning salutations and common expressions in students' native language (Villalba, Akos, Keeter, & Ames, 2007). School counselors should learn to pronounce students' names and make an effort to pronounce them correctly. When working with refugee students, school counselors should take small steps and focus on one goal at a time. They must ensure that they are not only seeing these students from the victim perspective but seeing their strengths and abilities (Morland, 2007).

Group counseling. Counseling groups might focus on life in a new school, coping with discrimination, career or higher education options, or coping with difficulty acquiring a new language as well as good memories and resilience. Counselors should use a variety of methods when working with students with limited language skills such as play therapy, art therapy, and music therapy. Fong (2007b) recommends that counselors consider cultural values as strengths and build their interventions based on the values of their clients. Bi-culturation of interventions is recommended as a culturally competent contextual practice. Use of the ecological approach, assessing and intervening on macro, meso, and micro levels, is also recommended for practitioners working with refugee students (Furuto, 2007).

Systems support. School counselors should work toward making the school "the central setting where various

communities could come together” (Anderson, 2004, p. 81). Collaborating with members and leaders of refugee communities and with teachers in the school is crucial to develop an understanding of refugee students’ needs. As schools work toward better serving refugee students as part of their internal challenges (Blackwell & Melzak, 2000), counselors should act as advocates and system change agents as parents may not have the strength, language skills, or social capital to challenge the system. School counselors should provide training to teachers and staff to help them work effectively with refugee students. For example, challenging behaviors of refugee students can possibly be a manifestation of different cultural norms and expectations rather than unwillingness to learn. Seeking consultation from community members to learn about the ways in which personal and mental health issues are handled in the students’ native countries and within their families is important. School counselors can establish collaborative relationships with community agencies that provide services to refugees. They should act as leaders in their schools and districts to create a collaborative system which facilitates integrating refugee students in schools while still allowing for recognition and respect to the traditional ways familiar to students.

Management System

School counselors should work with teachers and administrators to provide accommodations, redesign existing structures and programs, and adjust and add to existing school practices in order to promote integration of refugee students. Working closely with administrators may ensure that guidance curriculum is embedded into the overall school curriculum. The formation of an advisory council may provide support and include ethnic community members who can advocate for the specific cultural and mental health needs of refugee students. Members of specific communities can act as cultural brokers helping school counselors understand their refugee students within their cultural context.

School counselors should help content area teachers incorporate cultural aspects of various groups into the curriculum in the following ways:

- Assist social studies teachers in the creation of multi-linear historical narratives for various cultural groups in the class to both educate the host students and honor the cultures of refugee students.
- Work closely with English language learner (ELL) teachers (Clemente & Collison, 2000).
- Inform teachers on the amount and appropriate methods needed to communicate with students.

Incomplete information and lack of support may be frustrating for teachers and the stories also can be distressing or disturbing to them. School counselors should be available to provide information and support.

School counselors can also establish bridges with the community (Hobbs & Collison, 1995). Volunteers and teacher aids from the country of origin provide sense of fa-

miliarity, support, and guidance to students. School counselors must also consult with mental health professionals, child consultation agencies, and immigration and refugee services. Refugee students receive services and attend programs for the larger group of students who are labeled “immigrants,” “minorities,” or “English language learners.” There are, however, specific issues that originate in the nature of refugee experiences which are not addressed within the existing programs (Hamilton & Moore, 2004). School counselors must make sure that the services refugee students receive meet their specific educational and psychological needs.

Accountability

School counselors have responsibilities to demonstrate the success of their programs. Alternative data collection methods should be considered to reflect the refugee students’ experiences. School counselors can demonstrate the ways in which the services are helpful to refugee students such as increased school engagement, closing achievement gaps, parental involvement, and school atmosphere. Using disaggregated data of refugee student academic progress, attendance, extracurricular activity participation, school-wide behavioral referrals, and percentages of free/reduced lunch participation can be helpful to develop better services to refugee students (Villalba, Akos, Keeter, & Ames, 2007). In today’s climate of imposing high stake tests for achievement standards, it is easy to oversee the unique development and progress of refugee students. School counselors should align the focus on the educational progress of refugee students with their personal needs.

Conclusion

Schools have a critical role in providing necessary and sufficient resources to refugee students and their families (Anderson, 2004). School counselors can help create an environment where refugee children are growing, learning, and developing. In general, school counseling programs have been criticized for insufficient attention to cultural concerns, scarce effectiveness research, lack of developmental theory, and too little focus on prevention efforts (Gysbers & Lapan, 2009). The failure to address the needs of refugee students results in missed opportunities to build upon existing structures and to create an environment where refugee students’ wellbeing is in the focus of educational experiences. Refugees experience a variety of challenges from changes on social status to acculturation and cultural adaptation upon entering the settlement country (Anderson, Hamilton, Moore, Loewen, & Frater-Mathieson, 2004).

Further research is needed to explore the experiences, challenges, and practices of teachers, professional school counselors, and school and district leaders who work with refugee students. There is also need for studies that identify potential systemic barriers and other challenges presented by the ethnocentric educational system. Further research exploring the ways refugee families and students deal with

such barriers and the role of school counselors as advocates and change agents is needed. The evaluation of school counseling programs, individual and group counseling strategies, and small guidance activities that are developmentally appropriate will be helpful to build evidence based interventions for school counselors. This will help identify best practices for school counselors working with refugee students.

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